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Patrick K. Freer

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on the Voice

Sharon Hansen, editor <saahansen@uwm.edu>

Foundation of the Boy's Expanding Voice: A Response to Henry Leck

by

Patrick K. Freer

Editor's note: This article is in response to Henry Leck's "The Boy's Changing Expanding Voice: Take the High Road," *Choral Journal* 49, no. 11. (May 2009).

Changing — Mutating — Developing — Transforming. These terms are perhaps the most common descriptors for the process of adolescent male vocal development. Henry Leck's article in the May 2009 issue of the *Choral Journal* added another descriptor that has the potential to have a lasting impact on the lexicon: the boy's "expanding" voice.¹ This is a wonderfully apt term because it encompasses all that we know about the male changing voice and provides a label that is at once descriptive, precise, and future-oriented. What happens to a voice that is expanding? It gets larger in terms of range, timbre, dynamics, and expressive capabilities. There is nothing limiting about expansion—it is a boundlessly optimistic phenomenon.

Like the term "expanding voice," the adolescent boys who experience vocal change are also boundlessly optimistic. When we are able to relay our knowledge of the change process in terms they understand,

boys know what to expect and can eagerly anticipate the next steps along the vocal expansion route. Leck's article builds upon the foundational work of Duncan McKenzie, Irvin Cooper, Frederick Swanson, and John Cooksey. These four men, all researchers in their own ways, progressively redefined our knowledge of adolescent male vocal development, appropriate vocal pedagogy, and implications for ensemble singing. Their work has collectively spanned six decades, a period in which choral music in schools expanded beyond the high school a cappella choir movement of the early to mid-1900s to include the highest levels of musicianship for children and young adolescent singers of today.

It is within this framework that I wish to elaborate upon several themes addressed in Leck's article. Let it be noted at the outset that the article contains a great many points that Leck makes clearly and articulately. He is passionate about the optimal match between the skills of choristers and the challenges posed by repertoire. He is adamant that each chorister be assigned to sing parts that are vocally comfortable. And, he is a champion for the highest levels of musical integrity in both rehearsal and performance. Leck began his article with a brief overview of the work of McKenzie, Cooper, Swanson, and Cooksey. A more detailed examination reveals elements in their approaches that aptly serve to meet the diversified needs of adolescent males who come to our choirs with varied levels of experience and musical self-esteem. The purpose of this article is to allow readers to place Leck's approach

within the context of this previous, foundational work.

Singing in Music Education

A distinction must be made between singing as part of general music and singing within a choral ensemble. In the United States, initial discussions and research about the boys's changing voice centered upon the notion that singing should be taught to all students. The early works of McKenzie, Cooper, and Swanson all focused attention on the singing voice in junior high general music classes. It was not until the 1960s, in response to the Tanglewood Symposium, that general music classes came to exist as we know them today. Prior to that time, "general music" was singing, and singing was for everyone.

McKenzie, for example, specifically discussed the voice change process as appli-

Patrick K. Freer is associate professor of choral music education in the School of Music at Georgia State University. He is author of the DVD series *Success for Adolescent Singers: Unlocking the Potential in Middle School Choirs*. pfreer@gsu.edu

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cable to a general music curriculum based on singing. Published in 1956, McKenzie's book, *Training the Boy's Changing Voice*, was written to address the needs of music teachers who

were teaching general music classes.² He was not writing to address the needs of choral ensembles as we currently know them. McKenzie noted the distinction between music

classes that include ensemble singing and specialized choirs, stating "working conditions in the school are not comparable with those in the choir,"³ his "Alto-Tenor Plan" was "the best one for school purposes,"⁴ and other approaches may be "more suitable for choirs than for schools."⁵

Cooper's work was also primarily intended to assist general music teachers working with young adolescent singers, not "special performing groups such as choirs or ensembles."⁶ His concern, at the outset, was to improve the quality of instruction in music reading by providing guidelines for the ranges of sight-reading and other singing exercises so that all students could be successful. It was within this context that he indicated a composite unison range of a fifth—in octaves—for all students, male and female, in a typical junior high general music classroom.⁷ Cooper did advocate the application of his suggestions to junior high choral ensembles, but it is important to remember that these would have involved students in grades 7–9, not the typical grouping of grades 6–8 found in present-day middle schools. Rather, Cooper stated "the range criteria under discussion apply to singing activity in the general music class,"⁸ and the fewer, selected students in choral ensembles would likely possess wider ranges with more individual variety.⁹ This point was echoed by many current leaders in the field of adolescent vocal pedagogy in the November 2006 special focus issue of the *Choral Journal*.¹⁰ These leaders included Don L. Collins, who has applied Cooper's work to the current conception of choral ensembles within schools and churches.¹¹

Falsetto, Vocal Range, and Voice Classifications

The commonly used charts of vocal range associated with McKenzie, Cooper, Swanson, and Cooksey were presented as figures in the Leck article. It would appear from these charts as though the vocal range of adolescent boys lowers incrementally without retention of the ability to produce high notes, whether through falsetto or other vocal productions. Though not reflected in their own range charts, McKenzie, Cooper,

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Swanson and Cooksey each referred at length to the falsetto/upper/head/high voice in their writings. A reading of McKenzie's work, for example, shows that he did not ignore the falsetto voice in young tenors or basses.¹² He was, however, clearly an advocate for having boys sing in their newly lowered pitch range at the expense of higher pitches which may still be accessible, "because of the policy of encouraging the boy to find his changed voice."¹³ In a chapter titled "The Comfortable Range Policy," McKenzie referred to a "nonpermanency" of classification, stating "the voice classification within a group of boys with changing voices cannot be considered final for any given period because each voice changes at its own rate."¹⁴

McKenzie criticized Cooper for not being clear about the vocal quality expectations for upper notes in his (Cooper's) designation of *cambiata* and baritone ranges.¹⁵ Again, the question was not if falsetto/high voice existed or if it was to be used, but how it was to be recognized, whether experientially by the boy or aurally by the listener. Following in the tradition of Cooper, Collins noted that for boys, "the head area will become his falsetto which will not be used except for special effects and on extremely high literature."¹⁶ He clarified, however, that "it is important to have them use the head voice (falsetto) when production of the upper pitches creates tension ... the director should be adamant about the use of the head voice."¹⁷ Leck correctly notes that the use of falsetto or high voice was not the center of attention by McKenzie or Cooper with regard to overall vocal pedagogy and technique. Years later, Collins' textbook *Teaching Choral Music* built upon Cooper's work by incorporating many falsetto/high voice pedagogical techniques similar to those described by Leck.¹⁸

To my knowledge, Cooksey has never included falsetto designations in his charts depicting the successive stages of the male changing voice. This is problematic, especially since Cooksey found the midpoint of the change process to be indicated by the emergence of falsetto pitches¹⁹ as described in his popular 1999 book, *Working with Adolescent Voices*.²⁰ But, the chart most commonly used when referencing the Cooksey stages is the now-outdated one that appeared in the

concluding article of his 1977 *Choral Journal* series.²¹ This is the chart Leck reproduced in his article—and, indeed, it does not notate pitches for the falsetto voice though falsetto was elaborated upon throughout the article series.²² Cooksey's research drew upon a broad cross-section of boys, including boys with little or no prior experience with singing and those who experienced difficulty with phonation as part of the voice change process. Cooksey's focus on the general population of boys with changing voices, not solely the changing voices of boys who sing in choirs, is an oft-overlooked yet critically important aspect of his contribution to research.²³

The presentation of Cooksey's voice range chart as the sum total of his research gives a false impression that his work ignores the falsetto or high voice altogether. This is unfortunate because Cooksey does emphasize the use of the falsetto in boys who have access to those pitches. Cooksey rather extensively addresses the issue in his most recent writings, expressing concern about teachers who encourage boys to sing in their falsetto/high voices at the expense of

the lower pitches. Writes Cooksey, "when a boy who has sung only in falsetto attempts to sing in his new pitch range, he will not have skilled coordination of his larynx."²⁴ He continues, "Fortunately, a large majority of boys can learn to sing fairly comfortably in the falsetto register, especially if physically efficient vocal coordinations are used."²⁵ Based on current vocal physiology research, Cooksey distinguishes between falsetto and the "upper register" of the voice, indicating that it is a "crucial skill" for boys to learn how to transition smoothly from one to another.²⁶

The Use of Descending Vocalises

Like Leck, McKenzie advocated using a descending scale through all registers of a boy's voice as a tool for identifying distinct timbral qualities evidenced in different parts of the range.²⁷ He further employed the descending scale as part of his recommended procedure for building strength and continuity through the entirety of the range,²⁸ much as Leck encourages. That said, McKenzie advocated beginning the descend-

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ing scale just a few notes above the transition point between falsetto/head voice and the lower range. The goal for McKenzie was that "instead of bringing the falsetto voice down as low as possible, the aim should be to pass into the changed voice as high as possible."²⁹ Then, the teacher's task is to "cultivate the falsetto with a view to its developing into the higher notes of the baritone range."³⁰

Cooper suggested a number of activities to encourage the onset of a singing tone from boys who are especially reluctant or unable to produce such a tone. In nearly each activity, the pitch direction is from lower to higher, including glissandi and sirens.³¹ Once the boy has experienced a measure of success, Cooper then suggested reversing

the direction to sing from higher to lower pitches.

Regarding five-note descending scales, Swanson wrote:

by all means these descending passages should be begun in the high treble and gradually dropped down until the 'passagio' from treble to bass voice can be negotiated smoothly ... In many cases a boy can move smoothly from boy-voice to deeper tones in the bass clef keeping in his control as much as three octaves.³²

This equates to the three-octave range proposed by Leck.³³ Swanson did not em-

phasize the use of the high voice for boys in the latter stages of voice change, but he did offer a technique for preserving the upper pitches by:

gently vocalizing downward into the bass clef ranges ... If done consistently and properly, it is quite likely that their voices will never 'break' nor develop those troublesome areas of silence around middle-C. Eventually there will come a time when the boy voice becomes the faucette [falsetto], and the lower tones strengthen to become a bass-baritone-tenor in quality and range. Since this faucette

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has been kept functioning, and not allowed to atrophy, his range will not be restricted but will be greatly extended.³⁴

The Voicing of Repertoire

McKenzie stated that choral balance should not be a priority when dealing with vocal music education. Priority should be given toward working with the voices rather than forcing the voices to conform to an artificial balance that suits the parameters of the repertoire.³⁵ Leck tells of an experience early in his career when "there were not enough changed voices to do balanced SATB repertoire."³⁶ He adds "When you have a choir with few tenors and basses, it is not possible to do SATB repertoire because there are not enough boys."³⁷ McKenzie, Cooper, Swanson, and Cooksey would, in their own ways, each disagree with Leck on this point, especially when an SATB piece happens to suit the voices of the students in the class. In choral music education settings, repertoire must be chosen to fit the voices, not discarded simply because of balance issues. For example, Emily Crocker has written about how she relies on Cooksey's research for guidance when composing for choirs of young adolescent singers.³⁸

The balance question may, admittedly, have a different answer if the focus is on performance quality (the performance of the repertoire) rather than educative quality (the performance of the singers) when working with young adolescents. Leck's solution to this common conundrum is one on which McKenzie, Cooper, Swanson, and Cooksey would surely agree:

A better option is to seek out simpler music (for example two- or three-part treble) and be flexible in adapting parts in those arrangements to accommodate ranges that are comfortable for each singer. Wouldn't it make sense to ask the boys to sing a simple melody instead of asking them to sing a part that is down a sixth? . . . We need to vocalize [the singers], find where they sing the most comfortably, and find music that fits their ranges.³⁹


From Research to Practice

Leck's article opened with these words: "A number of people have attempted to understand the boy's changing voice through a system of vocal classifications."⁴⁰ I would like to offer an alternate perspective. We do not seek to understand the changing voice through voice classifications. Rather, the classifications result from our understanding of the changing voice. Classifications are only helpful if they can assist us in selecting repertoire, choosing pedagogical techniques, and knowing what characteristics we can expect from these boys and their voices in the months and years to come.

The work of McKenzie, Cooper, and Swanson gradually moved from the detailed representation of their own teaching experiences to increasingly rigorous research studies. This shift from experiential to objective data prompted vigorous debates between Cooper and Swanson that spilled onto the pages of the *Music Educators Journal* and other print sources.⁴¹ Cooksey's work then followed with an examination of the commonalities among existing theories and

data, concluding in a decades-long series of highly regarded research studies. What did all of these efforts have in common? They confirmed that the adolescent male voice change occurs in a predictable series of stages, but in a timeframe that is not predictable or uniform. Each concluded that multi-part repertoire is required, and that teachers need to know how to work with boys at each step along the change process.


Leck's work continues this legacy of attention to the adolescent voice, and his contribution is especially valuable when viewed as an extension of the North American children's choir movement begun in the early 1980s. Children in these choirs grow up and their voices change. These children have often experienced extraordinarily high levels of vocal training and are musicians of high caliber. We do these children a severe injustice when, as young adolescents, they come to our choirs and we do not embrace what they already know and can do. For these children, Leck's approach is unarguably and stunningly effective, perhaps exemplified best in the performances of his Indianapolis




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McKenzie, Cooper, Swanson, and Cooksey each addressed distinct aspects of the boys' changing voice, studied starkly dissimilar populations of boys, and made use of increasingly sophisticated research technologies to yield detailed information about the vocal physiology of adolescent males. Conductor-teachers should be guided toward recognition of this work as foundational to their understanding of different boys with different backgrounds, especially in choral settings with differing emphases on performance and education. The careful

application of theory and research can help the choral conductor guide all boys—representing all of these differences. Ultimately, the goal is that these boys understand their own voices and expand their musicianship, so that they can partake in choral singing throughout their lifetimes, whenever and wherever they choose.

NOTES

- ¹ Henry H. Leck, "The Boy's Changing Voice: Take the High Road," *Choral Journal* 49, no. 11 (2009): 49–60.
- ² Duncan McKenzie, *Training the Boy's Changing Voice* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1956): 134–36.
- ³ McKenzie. *Training*. 133.
- ⁴ McKenzie. *Training*. 136.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Irvin Cooper and Karl O. Kuersteiner, *Teaching Junior High School Music* (Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1965): 12.
- ⁷ Cooper and Kuersteiner. *Teaching*. 17.
- ⁸ Cooper and Kuersteiner. *Teaching*. 25.

- ⁹ Cooper and Kuersteiner. *Teaching*. 56–57.
- ¹⁰ *Choral Journal*, 47, no. 5 (November 2006).
- ¹¹ Don L. Collins, "Preferred Practices in Teaching Boys Whose Voices are Changing," *Choral Journal* 47, no. 5 (2006): 119–21.
- ¹² For example, see McKenzie. *Training*. 32, 40–42.
- ¹³ McKenzie. *Training*. 35. See also 34, 41.
- ¹⁴ McKenzie. *Training*. 83.
- ¹⁵ McKenzie. *Training*. 83.
- ¹⁶ Don L. Collins, "The Cambiata Concept: More Than Just About Changing Voices," *Choral Journal* 23, no. 4 (1982): 7.
- ¹⁷ Collins, "The Cambiata Concept." 8; see also Collins, "Preferred Practices." 119–21.
- ¹⁸ Don L. Collins, *Teaching Choral Music, 2nd Edition*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1999.
- ¹⁹ Cooksey, John. "Voice Transformation in Male Adolescents." In *Bodymind & Voice: Foundations of Voice Education*, ed. Leon Thurman and Graham Welch, 735. Iowa City, IA: National Center for Voice and Speech, 2000.
- ²⁰ For example, see John M. Cooksey, *Working with Adolescent Voices* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1999): 15, 38.
- ²¹ John M. Cooksey, "The Development of a Contemporary, Eclectic Theory for the Training and Cultivation of the Junior High School Male Changing Voice: Part I, Existing Theories," *Choral Journal* 18, no. 2 (1977): 5–14; John M. Cooksey, "The Development of a Contemporary, Eclectic Theory for the Training and Cultivation of the Junior High School Male Changing Voice: Part II, Scientific and Empirical Findings: Some Tentative Solutions," *Choral Journal* 18, no. 3 (1977): 5–16; John M. Cooksey, "The Development of a Contemporary, Eclectic Theory for the Training and Cultivation of the Junior High School Male Changing Voice: Part III, Developing an Integrated Approach to the Care and Training of the Junior High School Male Changing Voice," *Choral Journal* 18, no. 4 (1977): 5–15.
- ²² Cooksey, "Contemporary, Eclectic Theory, Part III." 6.
- ²³ Cooksey, John. "Understanding Male-Adolescent Voice Maturation: Some Significant Contributions by European and American Researchers." In *Five Centuries of Choral Music: Essays in Honor of Howard Swan*, ed. Gordon Paine, 82. Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 1989.
- ²⁴ Cooksey, John. "Male Adolescent Transforming



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²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 830.

²⁷ McKenzie. *Training*. 25, 38.

²⁸ McKenzie. *Training*. 38–42.

²⁹ McKenzie. *Training*. 42.

³⁰ McKenzie. *Training*. 83.

³¹ Cooper and Kuersteiner. *Teaching*. 48–54.

³² Frederick J. Swanson, *The Male Changing Voice Ages Eight to Eighteen* (Cedar Rapids, IA: Laurance Press, 1977): 91.

³³ Leck, "The Boy's Changing Expanding Voice." 49.

³⁴ Swanson. *Male Changing Voice*. 117.

³⁵ McKenzie. *Training*. 58–59, 62.

³⁶ Leck, "The Boy's Changing Expanding Voice." 49.

³⁷ Ibid., 56.

³⁸ Emily Crocker, "Choosing Music for Middle School Choirs," *Music Educators Journal* 48, no. 4 (2000): 33–37.

³⁹ Leck, "The Boy's Changing Expanding Voice." 56, 57–58; for examples of treble repertoire with flexible voicing see Patrick K. Freer, *TIPS: The First Weeks of Middle School Chorus* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2009); and Patrick K. Freer, "Between Research and Practice: How Choral Music Loses Boys In the 'Middle,'" *Music Educators Journal* 94, no. 2 (2007): 28–34.

⁴⁰ Leck, "The Boy's Changing Expanding Voice." 49.

⁴¹ Patrick K. Freer, "Boys' Changing Voices in the First Century of MENC Journals," *Music Educators*

Journal 95, no. 1 (2008), 41–47.

⁴² Anthony Young, "The Singing Classroom: Singing in Classroom Music and its Potential to Transform School Culture." In *Male Voices: Stories of Boys Learning Through Making Music*, ed. Scott D. Harrison, 62–78. (Camberwell, VIC, Australia: Australian Council for Educational Research Press, 2009).

⁴³ For example, see Steven M. Demorest and Ann Clements, "Factors Influencing the Pitch-Matching of Junior High Boys," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 55, no. 3 (2007): 190–203.



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